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## **SITUATION Symposium**

### **Francesca Murialdo**

*School of Design, Politecnico di Milano/labomint*

Francesca Murialdo is an architect and a PhD in Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design at Politecnico di Milano. Since 1998, she has worked in research and teaching at the School of Architecture and the School of Design at the Politecnico di Milano, including roles as researcher, supervisor and professor. Her work focuses on interior design-architecture, adaptive re-use, hospitality and retail strategy and design.

She has been invited to teach and organize workshops in Masters and Post Graduate programs in Italy and abroad.

Since 2005, she has taught at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, in Interior Design and Product Service System Design courses, leading the Design Studio in the BA and MA programs.

The site <http://laboworks.org/> is the didactic blog containing the course details, results and discussions.

After the experience of studiometrico, she founded laboMint in 2011, an interiors strategies project providing ideas and solutions to private and corporate identities. She has been invited to present her work at various universities and her design has been published on many architecture blogs and in numerous international books and magazines. The 'bastard store' project has been published in various books and been awarded ArchDaily's Building of the Year 2009 Award in the 'Interior' category and it was also a nominee for the 2012 Architecture Golden Medal of the Triennale di Milano.

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<http://www.labomint.com/>

## **IDEA store**

In the mid 1990s a group of professionals, researchers and intellectuals in the field of design met to explore challenges and opportunities in the awareness that design(ers), and its role, tools and tactics, have changed according to new contemporary issues and perspectives. *Design Futures*<sup>i</sup> was the name defining a new way to think, behave, teach and communicate this new situated relationship and the new forms of design.

The perception that the overall design discipline needed a substantial re-thinking came from the acknowledgement that products have turned into process, property into access, and authorial terms into shareability. Contents of the single disciplines (interior, product, communication) were reciprocally influential and ready to explore, propose and interpret different ways of designing.

Interior Design, intended as the discipline able to build (not only) physical connections in between spaces, people and objects, has deeply changed. The perception of it being

renounceable and superfluous has been replaced with a conviction it of being able to generate innovative and collaborative insight and solutions, moving fast towards new contents, new tools and different strategies focussed on contemporaneity.

Tools and methods of interior disciplines are able to draw connections to the social context and are flexible enough to be shapeable to specific situations, to promote social innovation, to raise awareness about values and beliefs and to question the borders of the established ways of living, working and consuming.

Interior topics include a complex network of knowledge thanks to its culturally and politically situated nature; it is an interdisciplinary space in which many other disciplines and different actors embrace diverse instruments and methods of enquiry.

Interior design today has to deal with strategy, business and politics, and to invent new frameworks able to engage and innovate. Besides traditional tools and components able to define spatial hierarchy and design quality (materials, construction components, decorative elements), we need to add new design ingredients such as communication, sustainability and cultural appeal. The topics, interests and competences are so wide that we deal with an increasing specialization.

In this framework, *retail design*, both in research and practice, is particularly interesting as an expression of this disciplinary shift, with an approach characterized by multidisciplinary, experimentation and a strong relational dimension.

Even if *consume* has not been included into the cycle of the daily function imagined by the Athens Chart (inhabiting, working, recreation), historically, the places of commerce have been special ones where social, economic, and political needs, that have shaped the modern world, have been presented and put into action. In a commodity-related civilisation, the market's rules have become a central topic to relate to, and the practice of consumption a reading tool to discuss essential issues closely related to our daily life, such as on what, how and where we consume not only goods but experiences, events and culture. Contemporary retail spaces are complex places combining many aspects that go beyond the spatial and functional to include the physical, social, cultural and economic as well. All these shape their personalities and specific traits.

Although the way modernists defined our way of living has been largely overtaken by merging functions and living attitudes, spaces are still recognized according to their typology: spaces for consumption, more than living and working spaces, engage with innovation also thanks to a better attitude of the consumer to behave different.

The radical change of the retail ingredients that faced the disappearance of the goods, of the target and of the typology, and the renovated interest for the design of the commercial spaces, enhance the exploration of new challenges for retail design.

Consumer society – the great abundance of goods, advertising and marketing – shifted our needs from material to immaterial desires: things we buy have ever-less material characteristics. Stores go beyond being places where merchandise is made available to become symbolic and metaphorical realms where products are becoming system of values, expressions of how we live and imagine our lives, indicators of social and political choices, and actions on the world, where what matters is (the much abused term) *experience*, now

reshaping into *participation*.

After having been turned from *citizens* into *consumers*, we witness another important role – that of transformation into *user*. The client is becoming the non- professional counterpart of the business company playing an active role and deeply influencing the company structure. The space for goods becomes the meeting ground between these two worlds, open and flexible in seeking new, more interesting expressions.

The continuous transformation of the spaces for goods is moving toward a complete typology disappearance, melting the different formats and concepts: they become specialized, sophisticated places that are ‘ideologically informed’ as Tony Fretton calls them.<sup>ii</sup> They become crucial hubs mixed with entertainment and culture and socializing cluster. This creates what Jeremy Rifkin termed ‘cultural capitalism’<sup>iii</sup> in which the economy is no longer dominated by property values but by information, culture and relationships. Knowledge, education, and communication become decisive parts of this value creation.

The strong experimental matrix of retail design is grounded on the envisioning of situations and circumstances as important design elements. The largely consumed concept of the temporary or pop-up store – real *situation stores* – well identifies the ability of consumption spaces to relate to a specific situation or immediate circumstances, not only in terms of immediate response to a commercial opportunity (as the traditional temporary store related to mass events as design, art or sport events) but also as situated answer to more complex issues such as sustainability from a business, social and environmental point of view beyond commercial needs.

Spaces for consumption must be characterized by a quick response to ever changing needs: adaptable in terms of space, display, content, experience and commercial opportunity. Retail design challenges the traditional hierarchy of space elements in favour of more experimental research to better translate the new commercial narratives. The multiple choices of the elements that come into play in a consumption space drive the design focus on issue as situations, circumstances and experimentation, assuming specific design qualities to be temporal, in progress, transformable, interpreted.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> ‘Design Futures Council’, [http://www.di.net/about/board\\_advisors/](http://www.di.net/about/board_advisors/)

<sup>ii</sup> D. Vernet and L. de Wit. ‘Foreword’. In *Boutiques and Other Retail Spaces*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> J. Rifkin. In *The Age Of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism: Where All of Life Is a Paid-For Experience*. Putnam: Publishing Group, 2000.

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